



riigikontroll  
National Audit Office of Estonia

# Supporting young people with special educational needs in acquiring vocational education and going to work

*Has the Ministry of Education and Research ensured that vocational educational institutions provide students with the support provided by law?*

Report of the National Audit Office to  
the Riigikogu  
Tallinn, 19 May 2025

### Did you know that...

vocational schools are responsible for ensuring that all students have access to support services, including career services, learning support, special and social pedagogical, and psychological services.

Source: § 3 (2) 2) of the Vocational Educational Institutions Act.

A student with special educational needs is a student who has been identified as needing additional support in the learning process.

In order to achieve the learning outcomes set out in the curriculum, the study time, teaching methodology, assessment methodology, learning organisation, learning materials or learning environment must be changed or adapted for such students.

Source: Conditions and Procedure for Students with Special Educational Needs Studying in Vocational Educational Institutions, § 2

### Did you know that...

The National Audit Office analysed 26 vocational schools in the audit. The Ministry of Education and Research is the manager of 24 vocational schools, two are owned by the City of Tartu and the City of Tallinn.

Vocational schools had approximately 19,000–21,000 students in the 2019/2020 to 2023/2024 academic years.

Depending on the academic year, the share of SEN students among them ranged from 7–13%. In total, 4,585 SEN students studied in vocational schools during the period reviewed.

## Summary of audit results

**The Ministry of Education and Research (MER) as the manager of most vocational schools has not ensured that all students in vocational educational institutions (hereinafter: vocational schools) receive the support provided by law. Without the necessary support, it is harder for students to succeed in their studies and in their working lives and to realise their development potential. The majority of vocational schools fail to provide the required support services and measures. There is a shortage of qualified support specialists in vocational schools, which means that a student's special educational needs may go unnoticed. In order to improve the quality of assessment of the need for support and ensure the availability of support services, the MER needs to provide more organisational and financial support to vocational schools.**

### Main observations

#### **Special educational needs may go unnoticed in vocational schools.**

Six (25%) out of the 24 vocational schools that responded to the survey of the National Audit Office said that they do not involve support specialists in the work of admission committees for every specialty. The representation of support specialists in the support groups of schools (that identify special needs) is also uneven. There is also a lack of common assessment tools and the risk that there is no uniform approach to the identification of the need for support in schools.

#### **90% of vocational schools are unable to provide support services and measures due to the lack of resources and do not guarantee the availability of the services provided for by law to students.**

According to the schools, they have either provided less support measures to SEN students than needed or have not provided such measures at all. The Estonian Education Information System showed that only one school had both a psychologist and a special education teacher and social educator working for them every year during the reference period, and that school was not managed by the MER but by a local government. Although schools have the right to outsource services on a needs-bases to external partners instead of hiring support specialists, they have not made much use of this option.

#### **Neither the MER nor the schools have taken into account forecasts of demand for labour when opening curricula.**

Schools have opened curricula on the basis of their previous experience and competence, as well as opened curricula that cost less. At the same time, not much consideration is given to forecasts of demand for labour. This has led to a situation where in some curriculum groups, the number of graduates

significantly exceeds the needs of the labour market, and the possibility of students applying the acquired education later in working life is smaller. This problem concerns everyone, including SEN students.

**Support for transition to work is not well implemented in vocational schools.** Supporting SEN students in continuing their studies as well as starting to work is at the intersection of the education and social systems, but so far the cooperation between the two systems (e.g. preparation of individual career plans, finding bases for traineeships) has not been optimal. In addition, schools are passive in organising job-based learning and expect employers to take the initiative in organising this.

### Did you know that...

in 2023, the state allocated additional funds in the amount of either **€5,746** or **€11,328** for the provision of special educational arrangements and support services to young people who need support in **upper secondary schools** when compared to ordinary studies, depending on their need for support.

The additional funds for supporting students of **vocational schools** who need similar support only amounted to either **€2,380** or **€5,334** (the amount depends on the support measure provided for the student).

For the period 2019–2023, the minimum salary of a teacher, on which the salary of support specialists also depends, has increased by 40%, while the support for SEN students in vocational schools has remained unchanged.

**The MER does not take into account the actual increase in study costs when funding the support for SEN students, unlike in upper secondary education.** As a result, the support needs of the students of vocational schools have not received the same attention as those of upper secondary school students. In upper secondary schools, the funding allocated for SEN pupils has increased flexibly year on year due to the increase in the salaries of teachers and support specialists, but the additional funding for SEN students in vocational education has remained at the same level since 2019 (see also the box on the left). Failure to take the actual cost increases into account hampers the design and development of effective support systems and the implementation of support measures tailored to the individual needs of students.

**Although the state has an obligation to ensure the accessibility of vocational training in every county, the law does not define exactly what ‘accessibility’ means.** It is not possible to study at all levels of vocational education in all counties. This may be unavoidable, as ensuring access to good quality vocational education requires a lot of resources and some specialisation of vocational schools may be practical. It must be clarified what ‘accessibility’ means.

### Recommendations of the National Audit Office to the Minister of Education and Research

- As a school manager, set the necessary performance indicators for support services and ensure that support needs are assessed consistently and with high quality, and that support services are accessible in schools.
- Coordinate the opening of curricula and the volume of vocational education offered across Estonia. Take into account the needs of the labour market when opening curricula, including by giving schools guidelines in the operating grant directive on the groups and forms of study in which admissions should be reduced or increased. Provide more job-based learning at secondary and tertiary levels to

help SEN students find better employment opportunities in the labour market.

- In order to improve the cooperation between the education and social systems, the Ministry of Social Affairs and the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Communications should agree on how and under whose responsibility case management work will be carried out to support students joining the labour market. Among other things, an agreement should be reached on the scope of data exchange needed for case management work.
- When the funding of vocational education is redesigned, taken into account that SEN students must be given support based on their individual needs, irrespective of whether they are studying in a vocational school or upper secondary school, both in terms of the content of the support measures and the volume of funding.
- Define more precisely how the principle of access to vocational education laid down in the law must be implemented in practice.

**Response of the Minister of Education and Research:** Thank you for your thorough audit and suggestions! A number of the actions recommended in the audit, such as the involvement of support specialists in the admission committees of schools and the development of guidance materials on how to identify a learner's need for support, have already been taken. Most of the recommended actions are at the planning or preparatory stage.

We agree that the principle of accessibility of vocational education needs to be defined more precisely. The need for changes to the legal framework will become clear in the course of studies and analyses.

The Ministry of Education and Research is preparing the terms of reference for the procurement "Analysis of Learning Pathways in Secondary and Tertiary Vocational Education" to identify the factors that encourage and hinder students in secondary and tertiary vocational education to study, enter employment or continue their studies, especially those related to the content, volume, form and organisation of studies, but also the provision of the necessary support. The analysis could be the basis for making recommendations for curriculum development, to policy makers and also input for improvements for school owners and institutions. The deadline for the results of the analysis is Q1 2026.

The Ministry of Social Affairs and the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Communications are cooperating to find solutions to support students in entering the labour market and are also waiting for the respective input from said analysis.

The MER has started to develop a new funding model for vocational education and will take the recommendations of the National Audit Office into account. The new draft model for funding vocational education will be ready in the first half of 2025. At present, the model is being discussed with the representatives of schools. The budgets of the schools for 2026 will be calculated on the basis of the model to be prepared.